

Seven Ways Lawyers Can Reduce Clients' Stress

We can't alleviate all the stressors felt by our clients in the course of their legal matters, but when lawyers, law firms and clients work together, the stress can be reduced and effectively managed. Here are tactics that firms and lawyers can use to ensure clients are satisfied, informed and less stressed.

1. Clear Communication

The lawyer-client relationship can disintegrate rapidly without effective communication, leading to mistrust and misunderstandings. Lawyers need to remember that clients are people who have legal issues rather than focusing on the legal issues only. You want to address the person, not just the issue. If, for example, you must deliver bad news to a client, remember that it is being delivered to someone who may have a complex emotional reaction to it. Consider the needs of the person when communicating, not just the needs of their business or the effect the issue will have on their legal matter. Be empathetic and give the client time to process the news. Offer a strategy and next steps only when the client is ready to listen.

2. Proper Expectations

Nothing can generate client stress more quickly than unreasonable expectations. Setting proper expectations is a no-brainer in theory, but in practice it can be more difficult. Sometimes lawyers inadvertently give clients the wrong impression about possible outcomes. Or, a lawyer will create a heightened client expectation by touting — with multiple caveats — the best-case scenario for a possible outcome. Unfortunately, many clients will only remember the scenario and completely forget the caveats, thereby creating the unreasonable expectation. Ultimately, no matter how great the legal representation, if that “best-case scenario” is not the eventual outcome, disappointment or unhappiness ensues.

3. Being in the Know

A few clients will assume that all is well unless they hear otherwise. Most clients, however, expect updates. They will assume *nothing* is happening if you don't inform them of progress that's being made in their matter. Ensure that regular updates go out to clients, even if the update merely states that the matter is currently in a “holding

pattern” before it can proceed further. Knowledge is power and one of the keys to low client stress.

4. Transparent and Timely Billing

This is a must for keeping client stress to a minimum. Transparent invoices detail legal services, break down work into understandable and concise blocks, and show all discounts clearly. Clients who can see from the invoice exactly what work was completed will be more likely to understand the fees, believe they are receiving value for their money, and pay without questions or concerns. To create detailed invoices, record time as it is incurred, whether hourly or daily. Keep an ongoing record of time worked to ensure that all billable time and tasks are captured accurately. Transparency in billing also entails using clear language that clients understand, so use layman’s terms in invoices for easy client comprehension.

Invoices should be sent on a regular periodic basis, usually each month, so the time between work completion and invoicing is short. Plus, invoices for smaller amounts are more likely to be approved and paid than larger ones, so don’t wait until the end of a matter, or even several months, to bill a client. Waiting to bill invites “sticker shock.” Timely and frequent billing also allows clients to budget more effectively internally, which they will greatly appreciate.

5. Responsiveness, In Time *and* Content

Yes, being “responsive” means responding to clients in a timely manner. Email and phone calls should be answered no later than the following day. Sometimes even a quick response to say “I received your voicemail and we can talk more tomorrow” will suffice for the time being. But true responsiveness also means proactively anticipating client needs and understanding how to respond in a manner that addresses them. The best way to offer this level of responsiveness is to become intimately familiar with the client’s business and understand their expectations regarding modes of communication. For example, does the client want to be cc’d on every small item that’s addressed via email, or only to be looped in when an important decision needs to be made? Does the client prefer to be mailed a summary of issues, or to have questions and answers addressed in phone calls? If you are not sure, ask.

6. Welcoming Environment

When clients feel welcomed and comfortable, it can help reduce their anxiety over having to retain a lawyer or pursue a legal matter. So it's important to make the law firm environment welcoming in every client interaction, including exchanges with receptionists, assistants and other staff. Start with your reception area. It should be comfortable and hospitable. Your receptionist should be friendly, attentive and able to attend to the small details. Make sure coffee or water is offered, have candies or snacks available, provide interesting reading materials and have clean, comfortable seating.

Examples of other small ways you can make clients feel welcome: Offer "insider's" directions for the best way to get to your office during rush hour, or places where parking is always easy to find. Or set up a parking validation arrangement with a nearby lot so clients don't have to pay parking fees when visiting your office. This attention to detail can go a long way toward relieving clients of other stressors that can negatively affect the attorney-client relationship.

7. Non-legal information and assistance

The icing on the cake for client satisfaction is providing other information and assistance in everyday areas related to the firm's focus. For example, a residential real estate firm can provide a list of moving companies, local activities and service providers, or amenities for clients new to a community. A family law practice might offer free in-house childcare to clients during attorney-client meetings. An estate planning practitioner could recommend accountants to help with tax planning needs related to the client's estate plan.

You can get creative in finding small ways to address the needs of your clients beyond their legal ones.

By Jamie Spannhake